

Covenant Groups: What They Are and How They Work

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Covenant Groups

A covenant group is a small relational group made up of six to twelve people who meet regularly to establish and nurture themselves in their own beloved community. Covenant groups provide an opportunity for group members to build strong relationships with each other and with the larger organization of which the small group is a part.

Covenant groups encourage people to talk, learn, work and play together over time. Members may tell their life stories, offer support, and engage in work to serve the larger community. Covenant groups offer expanding opportunities for growth, caring and connection within a congregation. Covenant groups offer caring affiliative networks, mutual responsibility, leadership opportunities, and a way for people to build and strengthen their communities.

In a covenant group, people experience a relational individuality which affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person. People experience themselves and each other as part of the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part. Together, people establish communities which embody the values of justice, democracy and human dignity. Each person is treated equitably. Each has a voice and is heard. And each person is respected for his or her own intrinsic humanity. The defining purpose of a covenant group is to bring people into right relationship with each other and with the larger world.

Covenant Groups: The Pattern

Size:	6-12 members
Meetings:	At least once a month, perhaps twice a month or once a week
Format:	Opening: Welcome and statement of group purpose Reading or ritual which ties the group to its larger organization and transcendent purpose Review of group covenants
	Check-in: What, briefly, is going on in your life today?
	Content: Experiencing, learning, discussion, planning, action, reflection: it is the group's choice.
	Check-out: How is everyone feeling now?
	Closing: Ritual which ties the group to its larger organization and transcendent purpose
	Leadership: Leader and co-leader are chosen and trained to facilitate the group's process. Leaders of groups meet together with the minister as a covenant group for ongoing training and support. Area ministers may also form a covenant group.
Covenants:	Ground rules for the group's relationship and interaction Commitment to welcome new members to the group Service to congregation and larger world

Covenant Group Meeting Format

A typical covenant group meeting format is as follows. Each component of the meeting is important to the group's relationship and effectiveness.

Opening:

Welcome and Statement of the Purpose of the Group:

The welcome and statement of purpose set the stage for the group. The welcome is essential, particularly when the group has new members. The statement of purpose starts everyone off on the same page. This is particularly important when there are new members and in the early stages of the group's development.

Ritual:

The opening ritual marks the beginning of the group's time together. This ritual ties the group to the larger organization of which it is a part and reminds the group of its transcendent purpose. Ritual exemplifies an embodied spirituality. It is a time for centering and for helping the members make the transition from the busy-ness of daily life to the more intentional and focused activity and discussion of the group. The centering time could be a song, a reading or a prayer. It can be accompanied by a symbolic gesture such as lighting a candle or chalice. If it is effective it will help the members to relax, center, breathe a little deeper and let go of the mundane thoughts with which they have entered the meeting.

Review of Group Covenants:

Particularly in early meetings and whenever new members are present, it is important that the facilitators restate the covenants by which members are agreeing to abide. For these covenants to be meaningful, they need to be remembered and used. It may be helpful to post ground rules at each meeting.

Check-In

The check-in is an invitation to each person to state her name and to speak briefly about what of significance she would like to share from her life. Other than saying her name, a person can pass, that is, she need not say anything. The group leader facilitates the check-in by inviting each person in turn to participate. A check-in is not a time for discussion or debate.

The benefits of the check-in are many. To be welcoming of newcomers and to help build rapport among members of the group, it is particularly important that old and new members alike introduce themselves. A person who has come to the meeting with particularly pressing news is given an opportunity to speak immediately. Having had the opportunity to share what is pressing on his mind, a participant then is more able to turn his attention to the other business or activities of the group. The physical and emotional states of members may vary and have a strong impact on the dynamics of a particular meeting. In the check-in members can share information on their physical or emotional state at that particular time. This may help to prevent or diffuse problems. For example, a person may be angry because of a problem at work. If the angry person states this, other members are less likely to misunderstand or misattribute the anger.

An additional benefit of the check-in is that it may be a catalyst for quiet or reticent members to participate in conversation and discussion. If a person has spoken once, he is more likely to speak again. Conversely, if a person has been sitting silent well into the meeting, it is much harder for him to break into the conversation. With the check-in, everyone gets to speak within the first few minutes of the meeting. This serves as an auditory reminder for the particularly talkative members that the other members present need and deserve time to share their views. The check-in sets a tone for valuing all members and equalizing participation.

Covenant Group Meeting Format, cont.

Content of the Meeting

During the body of the meeting, the group engages in what it has come together to focus on. This is a time for experiencing, learning, discussion, planning, action, reflection, or whatever activity the group has agreed upon.

One approach is to generate the agenda for the body of the meeting during the check in: that is, members are invited to state as part of their check in a topic or issue they would like to discuss during that session or the next. The pattern of group meetings might include every fourth meeting a service activity for the church or larger community of which the group is a part.

Check-Out

The check-out is an invitation for each member to make a brief concluding statement, usually one or two sentences. This can be a statement of her impression of the meeting, how she is feeling, something she has not yet had a chance to say, or something she does not want to leave hanging. The group leader facilitates the check-out by inviting each member in turn to make a statement. Members have the option to pass.

The benefits of the check-out are also many. It gives an indicator to the whole group and to the co-leaders in particular as to how the group is doing. It highlights strengths and gives quick notice of potential problems. It clears the air of items that may be hanging. It gives another opportunity for more quiet people to speak. It helps bring closure to a meeting. It underscores the importance and value of each member.

Closing

A closing ritual to mark the end of the group's time together. Like the opening ritual, the closing ties the group to the larger organization of which it is a part and reminds the group of its transcendent purpose. The closing may be a reading, a song, blowing out the candle, an individual or group prayer, or another activity chosen by the group.

Meeting Frequency

A covenant group meets at least once a month, perhaps twice a month or even weekly. A group needs to meet often enough that there is continuity from meeting to meeting. If the group meets less than once a month, it will be more difficult for activities and relationships to carry over from meeting to meeting.

Group Size and Growth Pattern

Ideally a covenant group will have between six and twelve members. A group needs to be small enough that each person can speak, be heard and be known. It needs to be large enough to generate energy and provide continuity.

There are a variety of ways that groups welcome new members and grow. Each group is started with the intention of welcoming new members to the group. Newcomers can be encouraged to attend at least three meetings to see what the group is about. Through this process of newcomers visiting and deciding to become members, the group will grow. As new members come into the group, a group peaks out in size at about ten to twelve members. At that point, new members no longer continue coming into the group. However, all groups over time experience attrition of old members who leave due to various life circumstances. Each time an old member leaves, this can create an opening in the group into which a new member is welcomed, keeping the group dynamic and vital.

Another strategy for welcoming new members is for a well-established group to birth a new similar group. This is done by a co-facilitator of the first group leaving that group, either temporarily or permanently, to help facilitate and get the new group started.

Yet another method for bringing in new members is for the group to divide when it reaches about twelve members, thus resulting in two groups of about six members each. These two groups are then open to new members to join. In practice this approach can be very challenging. However, when generating new groups is seen from the outset as a part of the covenant group experience, members can anticipate and thus are less stressed by the process.

Regardless of the method used to bring in new members, the key idea is that the groups stay open, dynamic, welcoming and not cliquish or factional. The covenant to welcome new members also means a commitment within the congregation to keep developing new groups.

Covenants

The members of a covenant group, early in the group's formation stage, create and agree to abide by a set of covenants. These covenants are a key part of what distinguishes a covenant group from other kinds of gatherings. The primary covenant will be about how the members agree to be in relationship with each other over time. Together, the group establishes a community in which justice, democracy and human dignity are embodied. Thus, the members agree to abide by a set of ground rules for right relationship.

A second covenant is a commitment to welcome new members to the group. Some groups always have an empty chair at each meeting to symbolize and remind themselves of the new members who are yet to come. The purpose of this covenant is to keep the group connected to the larger congregation and to prevent exclusiveness or factionalism. In practice there are a variety of ways of bringing new members into the group.

A third covenant is an agreement to engage in service to the congregation and larger world on a regular basis. This covenant helps to reinforce the group's connection to the larger organization of which it is a part. It helps group members develop and maintain an external focus, providing opportunities for members to put their values into practice.

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